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Community Leadership Development: A Case Story of Neighborhood Revitalization in the El Dorado Neighborhood

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine an initiatives approach to community revitalization in the El Dorado neighborhood using a place-based approach to the development of leaders in the community. The work described in this paper is supported by the following agencies: City of Fresno, Fresno Housing Authority, Property Owner's Association, Reading and Beyond, Wesley United Methodist Church, El Dorado Park Community Development Corporation (CDC)

Introduction

The El Dorado Park Neighborhood is located in Central in Fresno, California. The neighborhood is adjacent to California State University, Fresno (Fresno State), bound by East Barstow Avenue on the north, Bulldog Lane on the south, North Sixth Street to the east and North Fourth Street to the West ("Planning for Transformation," 2009). The neighborhood encompasses approximately 30 acres and 47 properties of mostly multi-family residential apartments. The area was first developed in the 1960's as affordable housing for Fresno State University students. However, over the past 15-20 years the resident population has been "replaced by low-income families and individuals seeking affordable housing" ("Planning for Transformation," 2009, p. 4). The neighborhood has been long called "Sin City" for its initial history of college party life, and now for chronic violence and poverty rates.

In 2012, a collaborative of 13 local agencies applied for the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP), a product of president Obama's Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative. The intention of the program is to improve neighborhoods impacted by concentrated poverty, under performing schools, and disproportionately high crime rates. Multiple Local agencies committed to the El Dorado neighborhood and this revitalization effort; local agencies such as the City of Fresno, Fresno Housing Authority, Fresno State, Property Owner's Association, Reading and Beyond, Wesley United Methodist Church, and the El Dorado Park Community Develop Corporation (CDC). In Late 2012, an announcement was made that Fresno would be a recipient of the program and be offered funding to staff BNCP with Site Directors; the Site Director became active January of 2013.

Key to BNCP is the collaborating of local agencies with national agencies, known as the Federal Management Team (FMT). The FMT is composed of the Department of Education (ED), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of Treasury, Office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Office of Urban Affairs (WHOUA), and the White House Domestic Policy Council (DPC) ("The White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative," 2009).

The Building Neighborhood Capacity Program encourages this through place-based approaches to empowering residents living in communities, such as El Dorado, and to develop leaders who can obtain the necessary tools and resources they need to transform a neighborhood of concentrated poverty into neighborhood of opportunity and hope.

The Challenge

Ongoing work for BNCP, for improving conditions in the neighborhood, is developing engaged resident leadership and sustainable partnerships that can be maintained after direct staffing in the neighborhood terms out. The FMT explicitly intended BNCP to be a short-term program so residents became their own advocates and, Fresno has emphasized that partners in the neighborhood learned how to address needs at the resident-level with existing resources.

Site Directors for BNCP learned many agencies identified the El Dorado neighborhood, as one that was "transitional," and approached the residents with a wide variety of incentives but utilization of services was still low. Site Directors decided against this approach, instead believing that a more effective strategy was for residents to determine their own values— internal incentives. With this in mind, a strategy was designed to:

- 1) Build authentic relationships
- 2) Gain commitment from residents

- 3) Provide education on issues residents had identified
- 4) Create a structure for residents to share their voices

Site Directors spent intensive time building trust intensively the first five months and established relationships with residents by fixing bikes, BBQs, playing games, coffee hours, and going to dinner with the residents. Staff did not offer “incentives” (free food, Starbucks cards, etc.) – instead, site directors were intentional in building genuine relationships.

Trust Building

Once some trust was developed, Site Directors established a core group of 8- 12 residents who were committed to attending weekly meetings and openly discussing how they could improve the neighborhood. The initial meetings were listening meetings. Site Directors also heavily facilitated meetings in beginning, asking residents what they wanted to see in their neighborhood. BNCP staff started with a very ethnically and geographically diverse community. Site Directors focused on creating a group culture built on the assets and strengths of residents. In order to develop agreement and an environment of teamwork, residents identified communication, family, and honesty as a group value system. Having a value system enhanced the group’s capacity to function as a unified voice. Site Directors also discovered residents desire to work with an individual coach so that they could even function within the group itself and there was significant contrast in how vocal (or not at all) resident were. Establishing a value system allowed the group to narrow their concerns regarding neighborhood safety as a group and an individual basis. The process involved listening to residents in what they meant safety was. Site Directors learned “feeling safe” was something residents wanted. Residents identified issues such as clean alleys, safety for children, and activities for children.

The Process

Site Directors established a learning process first. Site Directors listened to the concerns; law enforcement, Community Based Organizations, and other stakeholders were invited to speak on the issues identified, from their perspective, how residents could address identified or other potential problems. Site directors intended to create understanding of the systems affecting their lives and the process in which they functioned. The intention being as a group of residents we must first understand the problem in order to find a viable solution.

After learning the process, residents were eager to start making change for the neighborhood. Through a series of meetings, the group’s initial project was to organize an alley clean up in the neighborhood. Residents organized this event through outreach to residents in the neighborhood. Residents utilized their existing networks and a word of mouth approach. The resident group’s mindset was to find solutions that did not solely rely on other organizations or groups. Residents established a weekly time for residents to volunteers for alley maintenance after the initial cleanup. Residents volunteering in their own alleys began to help others who were not capable of doing it for themselves. People began to take ownership, not only for their own alley, but also for the community in general.

Organizations who were involved in the neighborhood began to ask the resident group for their involvement in their own initiatives. What began to develop was a resident group who wanted to be involved in everything and the residents were to be seen as a volunteer group in activities in El Dorado. Site Directors and the residents came to the realization they were over committing and involved in projects that did not fit the group’s focus around neighborhood safety. As a group, being able to say “no” was a skill that needed to be developed as both a group

and individuals. This was especially visible as Site Directors witnessed residents ‘burning out’ due to being involved in too many activities.

Lessons Learned

The Building Neighborhood Capacity Program has not created leaders; it has simply provided a space for growth. Site Directors have learned leadership development is a process and it takes time. The El Dorado neighborhood challenges are not its residents but a lack of meaningful opportunities for residents to participate in the community. Through the BNCP process, residents have a structure and resident group that is completely self-sustaining. Resident leaders currently have meetings and subcommittees, which engage other residents and stakeholders in the community. The leadership team builds their own agendas and drives their own issues in the neighborhood. Residents have begun to work with local organizations in a genuine engagement process. The resident group is now teaching institutions how to do business in their neighborhood in order to be effective in providing services. As they have learned to speak the institution language, they are respectfully asking for institutions to learn to speak theirs. Site Directors have also witnessed the confidence of individuals increase and this sense of enhanced skills, within themselves, has given them the self-esteem to involve themselves on local boards and steadily increasing their civic involvement. Also, there is a realization they cannot change the neighborhood by themselves and in some situations may need help; there is an understanding of collaboration in a community transformation process. The process must be flexible because individual residents have challenges that might prevent sustained engagement. Site Directors observe first-hand as they work with residents.

Some individuals were lost to personal issues like loss of a job, relocation, and choosing to further their education. Many individuals care where they live and are resolute to provide for their families. Most of the residents who live in this community have been here for generations and choose to stay in this community for its sense of family. This newly established leadership group is in its infancy. This work must be supported in order to continue to see success and maintain sustainability. Continued support from collaborative partners maintained its leadership by residents. Once the leadership group is established, residents and the organizations working in the El Dorado Neighborhood must continue to ask themselves three important questions:

1. What are we doing as a group to benefit the El Dorado neighborhood?
2. What do residents desire?
3. How can we align resources to help the community?

Ultimately, the broader impact to learning neighborhood revitalization field is the intentionality and importance to taking the time to building relationships with individuals. Initiatives that are eager to see immediate change must allow individuals to take the time for this critical piece in building true community. Being able to take an asset-based approach to community building provides implementable solutions, which, the community itself can take ownership for, and can be sustained. It is not dependent on grants, organizations, or other sources of funding. Also, organizational partners must be open to changing the definition of what success is. Many expect physical grand changes in the communities. Success for one community might be as simple as an individual who was not involved out of fear becoming an active participant in the neighborhood. Another impact is the increased social connections made by participating with others in helping make their block a better place. The evaluation of community revitalization work must continue to be based on the outcomes desired by those who live in it.

References

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